

NEWS FROM ALL PARTS

Rabbi brings Judaism to Siberia's frozen wastes

A MANCHESTER man, his wife and baby are braving the extreme temperatures of Siberia to rekindle the warmth of Judaism in the frozen wasteland.

A year ago, 25-year-old Rabbi Yehuda Weissler took up the position of Chief Rabbi of Siberia and has since travelled the length and breadth of the frozen North to revive Jewish communities.

Before taking up the position, Rabbi Weissler, the son of Olga and Yitzchok Weissler, of Salford, had taught in Kiev Yeshiva and headed a yeshiva in Berdichev, Ukraine.

He is based in Siberia's capital, Novosibirsk — the home of 15,000 Jews, most of whom are totally assimilated.

Rabbi Weissler singles out the stories of a few who tried to maintain some kind of Jewish identity throughout the Communist regime.

Basya Kutzinov lives alone with only her 20 cats for company. Her father was the rabbi of Vladivostok, who was murdered before her eyes because he would not work on Shabbat.

She never married because she could not be sure of the Jewish identity of her suitors. She has not tasted meat for 50 years. She has only one remaining tooth as Novosibirsk dentists only work on Shabbat.

Chaim Sovsky, now 80,

By DOREEN WACHMANN

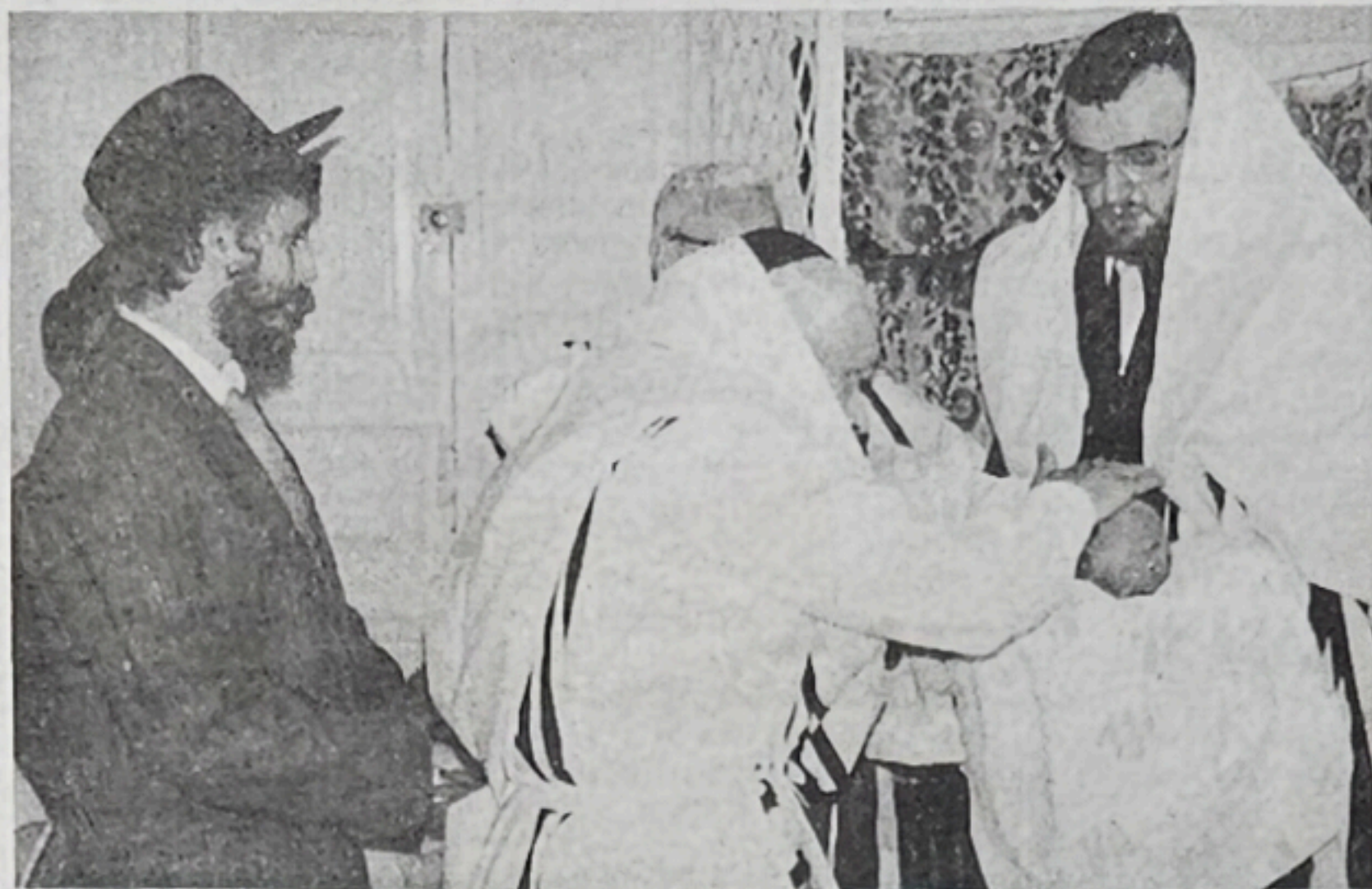
was sent to Tomsk from Poland when he was 13. He teaches Alef Bet to his grandchildren and never works on Shabbat.

On visiting him, Rabbi Weissler noticed a meat koshering bucket and draining board. Chaim explained that he always koshered his meat. Rabbi Weissler asked about shechita which had been non-existent in the area.

Chaim had never heard of shechita. He only remembered his mother koshering her meat. For more than 60 years he had been meticulously koshering non-kosher meat!

As he left, Chaim begged Rabbi Weissler to perform tahara on his body after his death.

A 60-year-old man begged to be circumcised. When the mohel arrived after a five-hour flight, he discovered that the man had already been circumcised, probably in a secret ceremony as a child, and had never known!



Rabbi Weissler holding baby Yaakov Marom, the first child in Omsk, Siberia, to be circumcised on time for more than 50 years. Performing the circumcision is Rabbi Shmuel Goldberg, of Manchester

But thanks to Rabbi Weissler and his wife Mirelle, things are now changing in Siberia.

He approached the Mayor of Novosibirsk with a request for a Jewish communal building. A few days later, the Mayor's wife died after which he donated the local telephone exchange — a massive building which will serve as a synagogue, school and community centre.

The Weisslers have set up a kindergarten of 40 children, a cheder of 150, a kollel where 15 young men

study full time and a synagogue which has a Shabbat morning attendance of 40.

On Yom Kippur 100 congregants were in synagogue all day, most of them fasting.

Rabbi Weissler has also converted a disused bathhouse into a mikva and every month a shochet comes from Moscow to provide kosher meat. His latest achievement is the establishment of a kosher bakery.

Rabbi Weissler has also ventured into the Siberian Gulag, normally out of bounds to foreigners. Out of

the 700 prisoners in this primitive labour camp, 70 are Jewish.

But Siberian prison head Vladimir Kisilev assured Rabbi Weissler that they were all criminals and not political prisoners or refuseniks. Some had been there for as long as 10 years.

Rabbi Weissler describes the scene: "A couple of hundred skeletal beings, mostly with shaven heads, dressed in filthy ragged uniforms, many with open sores on their faces, watched me through large staring eyes."



Rabbi Weissler with the Mayor of Novosibirsk who donated a telephone exchange for a Jewish community centre



Rabbi Weissler being taken around the Siberian Gulag with Siberian prison head Vladimir Kisilev

"Their 'bed' was a rag on the concrete floor. Sanitation consisted of a hole in the ground outside. The dirt

and the stench was indescribable.

"There is no heating — even in winter when the temperature reaches minus 35 degrees.

"This scene, so comparable to the sights of the concentration camps, will be printed in my mind for ever."

"For one moment my thoughts flashed back to Strangeways Prison (or palace) in my

native Manchester where the British government have invested untold millions and untold luxuries. Could this be the same world?"

He explains that with the collapse of the Soviet regime, Siberian prison conditions have deteriorated because of the collapse of the economy which leaves many prisoners literally starving.

Rabbi's Weissler's activities are funded by Shvut Ami, an Israeli outreach organisation.



(LEFT) Rabbi Weissler with the Moscow shochet who travels monthly to Siberia

Mirelle Weissler with cheder pupils

ISRAEL PAYS TRIBUTE TO DUKE'S HEROINE MOTHER

THE Duke of Edinburgh on Monday received the honour of Righteous Among the Nations.

It was in tribute to his mother, Princess Alice, who saved a Jewish family in Athens during the Holocaust.

Prince Philip is the first member of the British Royal Family to visit Israel since the establishment of the Jewish state.

At a ceremony at Yad Vashem, the Duke spoke out for the first time on his mother's humanitarian role.

"God brings everything we do to judgment," he wrote in the visitors' book.

Before the ceremony, Prince Philip visited the crypt in the Church of St. Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives, where his mother's coffin lies.

Princess Alice died in 1969. In 1988, she was interred at the Russian Orthodox church in accordance with her dying wishes.

In September, 1943, members of the Cohen family, from the Greek town of Troika, appealed to Princess Alice for refuge.

An acquaintance of theirs, she took them in and hid them until the Nazis

BATSHEVA TSUR and NAOMI SEGAL in Jerusalem

withdrew in October, 1944.

The RAF plane carrying Prince Philip touched down at Ben-Gurion Airport at midday on Sunday.

Because it is a private visit, there was no official ceremony, but the Duke was welcomed by Education Minister Amnon Rubinstein, who quipped: "We haven't seen so many Union Jacks in this part of the world since 1948."

First stop was the Ramat Gan residence of British ambassador Andrew Burns, who hosted a private reception for those involved in British-Israeli relations.

Philip's older sister Sophie, who had arrived on Saturday night, was also there.

During the reception, the Duke awarded seven gold medals to needy Jewish and Israeli Arab children. Then he visited the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, a well-tended oasis of green in Ramle's drab industrial zone.

The cemetery, which dates back to World War One, contains 7,000 gra-

ves, including those of a few Jewish and Moslem servicemen.

After laying a wreath at the giant cross that dominates the cemetery, the Duke spoke to the veterans, asking them about their service and examining the Hebrew writing on the flag of the Jewish Brigade.

For at least one veteran, it was one of the most exciting days of her life.

Sarah Koffler, of Tel Aviv, who served in the Army Territorial Service, was wearing the MBE she was awarded by the Queen 20 years ago.

"It doesn't seem real," she said. "I feel like Sarah in Wonderland."

"But," she added wistfully, "there used to be 30,000 of us and now we are dying off."

A thorough inspection of many of the graves followed. "This one is cracked," said the Duke. "We must take care of it."

On Sunday night, President Ezer Weizman and his wife, Reuma, hosted the Prince and his sister at a dinner at the presidential residence.

The question of a state visit by the Queen was believed to have been discussed during the dinner. (JPFS)

A REPORT in *The Times* on the Duke of Edinburgh's visit to Israel was slammed as "antisemitic" this week.

The accusation came from the Israeli embassy's chargé d'affaires, Gideon Meir, speaking in Manchester this week.

He urged the Jewish community to "jam" the letters page of *The Times* with letters of protest.

The report — from Christopher Walker in Ramla — referred to the Duke's visit to a cemetery where two British sergeants, "kidnapped and murdered by Irgun terrorists", are buried.

Board of Deputies chief executive Neville Nagler told the *Jewish Telegraph*: "The article gave an unfortunate slant on the event."

"It was a pity it did not go into the background of why the two soldiers were killed and that it did not say how Jews have been killed by Arab terrorists, not to mention by the British."

The *Times* said the Duke

Press report 'antisemitic'

had entered the political minefield of the Arab-Jewish conflict.

Walker wrote: "The Duke was plunged into the violent history of the Jewish terrorists who fought against Britain's mandate in Palestine."

Murdered

"The reality was brought home when he arrived at a Commonwealth war cemetery in Ramla."

"Among the graves the Duke saw were those of two sergeants, Clifford Martin and Mervyn Palce, kidnapped and murdered on July 30, 1947, by an Irgun terrorist squad acting on the orders of the late Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, of the Likud party which is now in opposition."

The *Times* report went: "The murders — despite a plea to Irgun by Martin, who was Jewish — and the booby-trapping of the bodies with a mine that injured British rescuers, prompted antisemitic riots in many British cities and sent British troops in Palestine rampaging against Jewish targets."

Other members of the Israel Embassy staff refused to endorse Gideon Meir's criticism of the article.

Spokesman Ram Aviram merely said: "We see Prince Philip's visit as one more step in furthering the relationship between Israel and Great Britain."

● In Tuesday's *Times*, Walker wrote a much more sympathetic article entitled *Duke Pays Homage to Holocaust Millions*.